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ABSTRACT

Rural homelessness in America is difficult to define, to count, and to see. This article reports the findings of a 1993 county-wide study of rural homelessness. During a one year survey, 118 homeless households were interviewed. Of those surveyed, 25.8 percent were male adults, 30.9 percent were female adults, and 43.2 percent were children. Results indicate that differences do exist in the demographic characteristics of the rural homeless population as compared to urban populations. Data from the study indicate that homeless people in rural areas are younger, lack family or friends to rely upon for help, have steady incomes, and are less likely to be disabled. They are also more likely to be homeless because of economic reasons rather than from problems arising from mental illness or substance abuse. The study proves that many individuals and families are unable to secure affordable housing in rural areas. Economic factors were given as reasons for homelessness by 71 percent of the households, with 6.7 percent reporting homelessness due to domestic violence. Some 21.1 percent of the households had received an eviction notice to leave the premises, 33.8 percent reported they were residing with relatives or friends, 16.9 percent were temporarily staying in a motel, 11.8 percent had to leave their own apartment or house due to substandard conditions, 9.3 percent were residing in their car, and 7.1 percent were living in shelters ranging from tents to parking garages. Contains three tables of data and eleven references. (RJM)

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Running head: RURAL HOMELESSNESS IN NORTHWEST OHIO

Rural Homelessness in Northwest Ohio: Reasons, Patterns, Statistics, and Trends

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Abstract

Rural homelessness in America is difficult to define, to count, and even to see. Therefore, it often goes unnoticed and the issue is rarely addressed. This article reports the findings of a 1993 countywide study of rural homelessness in Northwest Ohio. During a one year data collection period, 118 homeless households were interviewed; 62 of these families had children, and 119 of the 275 homeless individuals were children themselves. The conclusion is that rural homelessness has resulted because of rural poverty; also, if changes are to occur, professionals must collaborate and use the rural setting to their advantage to advocate for policy change.

Rural Homelessness in Northwest Ohio: Reasons, Patterns, Statistics, and Trends

Purpose of this Study

Homelessness, in rural America, is hard to find. Visible homelessness, in the sense of skid row alcoholics and happy wonderers sleeping in the streets or community shelters, is quite rare in small towns and the open countryside. However, in reality, rural homelessness does exist and reports have also begun to note that rural homelessness appears to be growing (Patton, 1987). Most prior studies on homelessness have focused on large urban areas (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1986, 1989); few studies have examined homelessness in rural communities (Redburn and Buss, 1986). The lack of knowledge about the needs of people who are homeless in rural and other nonurban areas and about the causes of their homelessness has prevented social workers, counselors, psychologists, teachers, policymakers, and other helping professionals from adequately addressing the problem.

This article presents the results from a countywide study of rural and nonurban homelessness in Northwest Ohio. During the year of 1993, all persons who sought assistance at this county's Department of Human Services because of "homelessness" were interviewed by the agency's social workers. Similar to an Ohio statewide study completed in 1990 by the National Institute of Mental Health, the results document the characteristics, needs, and resources of people who are unable to locate and afford a place to live in rural America.

Homelessness in Rural Areas

A major impediment to recognizing and measuring rural homelessness is simply that there is no clear agreement on what constitutes homelessness in rural areas (Fitchen, 1992). Without a clear standard definition of rural homelessness, this

population cannot be adequately described or quantified. Therefore, there have not been many systematic attempts to measure this problem. Several fairly recent articles on homeless families do not even mention the rural homeless (Bassuk, 1991), and the most well known studies of homelessness are entirely confined to the urban situation (Rossi, Wright, Fisher, and Willis, 1987) where there is more general agreement on a working definition of homelessness (Fitchen, 1992). For rural homelessness, however, the largest descriptive study publishing data before 1988 was completed by the Ohio Department of Mental Health and provided a picture of homelessness in sixteen randomly selected rural counties. However, in time since publication of those findings, service providers and advocacy groups have observed that the faces of homelessness are changing; increasing numbers of rural peoples, children and families are becoming homeless (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 1989). In 1988, Patton also observed these changes occurring in the rural homelessness population. Patton even published a definition for rural homelessness by suggesting that "rural people should be classified as homeless if their housing is both unstable and temporary, or if they lack resources to secure adequate housing." Unfortunately, as of 1990, this definition had not gained general acceptance. This study, on the other hand, similar to the Ohio statewide study completed by First, Rife, and Toomey (funded by the National Institute of Mental Health), accepted Patton's definition, and has made effort to address this rural homelessness deficiency by identifying the characteristics, needs, and resources of people who are homeless in rural areas.

Method

Study Setting

The study was conducted from January through December 1993.

The sample was obtained by interviewing all people who sought assistance through the county's Department of Human Services because of homelessness. It was determined that this county is a rural county because in order to be designated as rural, a county must have less than 200,000 in total population and designated area of at least the state mean (26.7 percent) of the total rural area (First et al. 1994). Although this particular county is a growing suburban community adjacent to a large city, it still met the rural community designations. In 1993, this county's total population was about 113,269.

Definition of Homelessness

This study used the same definition of homelessness that was suggested by Patton in 1988. Each potential respondent was screened using this definition. If potential respondents stated their current housing was unstable or temporary, or that they lacked resources to obtain secure adequate housing, they were defined as homeless with the following definition: Homelessness means the households were without shelter, were temporarily staying with others as they had lost their homes, or they had been served an eviction notice and would become homeless if a solution was not found as the family lacked the resources to keep their current housing or obtain new housing.

Study Instrument

All of the social workers completing the interviews used a Homeless Person Survey Log developed by the social workers working in the agency's Social Services Unit. The instrument consisted of eight sections:

1. Total Household Population
2. Ages of Household Members
3. Prior Residence
4. Cause of Homelessness (client's statement)

5. Source(s) of Household Income
6. Earned Income by Household (Monthly)
7. Where the Family Stayed the Past Night(s)
8. Outcome of the Homelessness (After Contact with the Agency)

Data Collection and Analysis

This study attempted to locate and interview all of the homeless people in the rural county. To facilitate the identification of homeless people, the project staff built relationships with knowledgeable residents within the community. Because majority of the social workers belonged to the community's homelessness task force, and the county's federal homelessness assistance funds were distributed by the agency's social workers, a referral network within the county was developed to refer all homeless individuals and families to the county's Department of Human Services for assistance. When interviewed, the agency's Social Services Supervisor, also a social worker, supervised the data collection process which included the determination as to if the client or family met the study's definition of homelessness. All of the individuals and families who met the definition of homelessness agreed to participate in the agency's study. Because the author acknowledges that some homeless people were probably missed during this interview process, and because this information is based on self-declared needs, this information should only be used to get an idea of the number of people who presented themselves as being homeless.

Interviews took place in the social workers' offices. Interviewers were trained to know community resources and make referrals for clients who needed other services. However, as licensed professionals, they knew, and were cautioned, to respect client wishes and not be coercive, or break a client's

confidentiality. The average length of an interview was thirty minutes; some took only fifteen minutes, and others lasted as long as two hours.

Double counting of respondents was avoided through a screening process completed by the Social Services Supervisor. Clients had the option of releasing their name to the social worker or not, and all of them agreed to do so. When the Social Services Supervisor reviewed the information and completed the final report, she screened for duplicate households that returned to the agency during the same crisis situation. When the final report was completed, names were not released and, therefore, confidentiality has been respected.

Results

Characteristics of Respondents

Of the 118 households interviewed in this study, it was found that a total of 275 people were reported to be homeless in 1993. Seventy one of these people (25.8 percent) were male adults, eighty five of these people (30.9 percent) were female adults, and 119 of these people (43.2 percent) were children.

The age range of adult respondents was 16 to 59 years (two at the age of 16 were emancipated minors). The mean age was 32.2 years, and the median was 29 years. More than three-quarters (78.8 percent) of the adult respondents were between 18 and 39 years old. Only 6.4 percent were 50 and older.

Approximately twenty four percent of the households were couples with children, 28.8 percent were single adults with children, and 47.4 percent of the households were childless adults. Only one member in all of the eighteen households was a military veteran and all others reported that they had not previously served in the military.

All of the information regarding the characteristics of the

respondents can be found in Table 1.

Place Table 1 about here

Patterns of Homelessness

At the time of their homelessness crisis, 21.1 percent of the households were residing in their current home but had an eviction notice to leave the premises, 33.8 percent of the households reported that they were residing with relatives or friends, 16.9 percent reported that they were temporarily staying in a motel, 11.8 percent reported that they were staying in their own apartment or house but have to leave due to substandard housing conditions (as reported by the county's health department), and 9.3 percent reported that they were residing in their car. The remaining 7.1 percent of the households reported that they were residing in shelters, were just released from jail, were staying in a tent, or were sleeping in a parking garage. (It should be noted that this particular county does not have a local homeless shelter so families wanting to stay, or already staying, in a shelter were traveling to a nearby county to do so.)

In regards to mobility, 78.8 percent of the households reported that their prior residence was in the county that this study took place. Ten percent were from other counties within the state of Ohio, and 11 percent were from another state.

The households were asked to identify the reason for their homelessness situation. Economic factors (eviction, foreclosure, nonpayment of rent, and unemployment or underemployment) were given as reasons for homelessness by 71 percent of the households. Domestic violence was given as the reason for homelessness by 6.7 percent of the families, and 9.2 percent of the families stated that they moved to Ohio to find work or to be

with family or friends. Three of the 118 households reported that their home was destroyed by a fire, and four of the homeless persons reported that they were just released from jail. Three percent of the households reported that the health department told them to evacuate because their home would be condemned as it did not meet standard housing requirements. Other reasons given for homelessness was drugs (by one of the families), sexual assault (by two of the families), and unknown (by two of the families).

All founded patterns of homelessness are listed in Table 2.

Place Table 2 about here

Resources and Needs of Respondents

Of the 118 households, 33 (27.9 percent) reported that their household had no income at the time of crisis. A percentage of 23.7 households stated that their income is from public assistance benefits and, equally, another 23.7 percent stated that their household's income comes from employment earnings. Thirteen percent of the households mentioned that their income is from Supplemental Security Income/Supplemental Security Disability Income, and 3.3 percent of the households were receiving unemployment benefits. Another 6.2 percent of the households reported that the household's only income was from child support. The remaining 2.5 percent of the household stated that their income was from a Veteran's Pension, or from "other resources" such as odd jobs or family or friends.

For a family consisting of one person, the range of income was from $140 to $650 per month. The mean income for one person was $365.55 per month. When a household consisted of two persons, the range of monthly income was from $640 to $1040. The mean monthly income for a family of two was $817.50. For a

family of three, the range of household monthly income was from $480 to $1280. The average monthly income for a family of three was $714.40. Five families reported that their household consisted of four people and these families' incomes ranged from $406 to $1250 per month. The mean income for a family of four was $691.60 per month. One family consisted of five family members and reported a household income of $1120 per month. In addition, one family reported that their income was $1500 per month for a family of six.

Although 33 percent of the respondents were staying with friends or relatives temporarily during their housing crisis, only 3.3 percent of these households believed that their family or friends could assist them in finding a new location to live. This was a very small finding compared to the study completed by the National Institute of Mental Health in 1990 which found that 52.1 percent of their homeless population believed that they had relatives that they could count on for help (First et al. 1994). The social workers referred 26 percent of the households in this study to shelters outside of the county, while a mere 3.3 percent refused to be referred to a shelter for assistance. The social workers assisted another 47.7 percent of the households with Emergency Homeless Program and FEMA funds (both federal emergency assistance funds), as well as with some local donated funds either to avoid the families eviction by paying one month's rent or moving the family to a new home by paying the family's first month's rent and/or deposit. About 19 percent of the households were advised of potential assistance such as a referral to a shelter or assistance with rent or deposit but never returned to the agency to follow through with any of the assistance. The remaining one percent of the households were referred to the Veterans Administration, the Salvation Army, or the American Red

Cross.

The recorded needs and resources used by the households in this study can be found in Table 3.

Place Table 3 about here

Conclusions

A major finding in this study is that differences do exist in the demographic characteristics of the rural homeless population as compared to urban populations (Fischer, 1991). Data from this study indicate that homeless people in rural areas are younger, are without many family or friends to rely upon for help, have steady income, and are less likely to be disabled. They are also more likely to be homeless because of economic reasons rather than mental illness or substance abuse problems. These rural-urban differences are consistent with the patterns established in the National Institute of Mental Health 1990 Ohio study.

This study proves that many individuals and families are unable to secure affordable housing in rural areas. Many of the households in this study had a steady monthly income yet they were still unable to find and keep affordable housing. It is obvious that rural homelessness cannot be blamed on dysfunctional individuals or dysfunctional families but, rather, the problem seems to be that rural homelessness is a symptom of the growth in rural poverty. Fitchen (1991), documented how plant closings, layoffs, cutbacks, and other declines in the nonfarm economy have created a dependence on low-wage employment, resulting in higher numbers of working poor people. As a result, this study proves that underemployment and unemployment, now seen even in the rural communities, are critical issues facing rural communities and families by causing substandard housing

conditions and homelessness.

The rural environment presents both challenges and potentials for dealing with the problem of homelessness (Fitchen, 1992). The main challenge is that the public and policymakers refuse to believe that rural homelessness and rural poverty really exist. However, rural areas offer some opportunities for combatting this challenge, as well as rural homelessness itself. Small town communities have the ability to network, as this community did in this study, and work together to expand their individual programs to integrate case management services, transportation services, and child care services to existing programs, which would allow the families facing rural poverty more assistance over longer periods of time. This in itself would provide more permanent assistance and could also allow the rural communities to get a better grasp on exactly how serious the problem of rural homelessness is.

The government needs to be convinced that rural homelessness does exists in order for it to develop a national policy that will protect the poor and near-poor populations in rural communities from the effects of this changing and depressed economy. Policy making for rural homelessness also needs to focus on three interrelated levels of efforts: 1) assisting people who are currently homeless through the provision of emergency assistance, 2) protecting poor people who are at-risk of becoming homeless by providing housing assistance, job training, and supportive services, and 3) preventing others from becoming homeless because of depressed economic conditions by increasing the supply of jobs paying a livable wage and the supply of affordable housing in rural areas (First et al. 1994).

Ultimately, success in preventing homelessness in rural areas will depend on eliminating poverty in rural areas and

increasing the amount of available affordable housing (First et al. 1994). Social workers, counselors, teachers, psychologists, and other helping professionals must address these issues by networking and advocating for changes in policy. The current trend is drastically affecting the lives of many adults, and even more children as poverty continues to exist. Many children are unable to get to school daily because of homelessness, and there parents are unable to get to work. These cycles continue generation after generation because families often restabilize and then reenter the cycle of poverty and homelessness. Both short term assistance and long term prevention strategies are needed to stop these cycles from continuing; but they must be designed and carried out in ways appropriate to the rural setting and situation. Reversing the current trend, and getting the government to address the issues of rural poverty and rural homelessness is going to take the work of collaboration from as many professionals as possible wishing to assist and do something about this very serious issue.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of respondents (N = 118 households/275 people)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Male	71	25.8
Female	85	30.9
Age		
under 16	119	43.2
16-18 years (emancipated)	2	1.2
18-29 years	81	51.9
30-39 years	42	26.9
40-49 years	21	13.4
50-59 years	10	6.4
60+ years	0	0.0
Household Composition		
Couples with children	28	23.7
Single adults w/children	34	28.8
Couples without children	56	47.4
Veteran status		
yes	1	.8
no	0	92.2

Table 2

Patterns of Homelessness (N = 118 households)

Measure	n	%
Where family stayed the night prior to the interview		
Current home (have eviction notice)	25	21.1
With relatives	20	16.9
With friends	20	16.9
In a motel	20	16.9
Own apartment/house (must leave due to substandard conditions)	14	11.8
Car	11	9.3
Shelter/Mission	4	3.3
Jail	2	1.6
Tent	1	.8
Parking garage	1	.8
Previous residence		
This county	93	78.8
Other county in Ohio	12	10.1
Another state	13	11.0
Reason for homelessness		
Underemployment	16	13.5
Unemployment	10	8.4
Eviction (nonpayment of rent)	57	48.3
House Foreclosure	1	.8
Domestic Violence	8	6.7
Moved to Ohio to locate work	7	5.9
Moved to Ohio to be with family	4	3.3
Home destroyed by fire	3	2.5
Home condemned (substandard housing)	4	3.3
Released from jail	4	3.3
Drugs	1	.8
Sexual assault	2	1.6
Unknown	2	1.6

Table 3

Resources and Needs of Respondents (N = 118 households)

Resources and Needs	n	%
Source of income		
None	33	27.9
Public assistance	28	23.7
Earnings	28	23.7
Social Security/SSI	15	12.7
Unemployment Compensation	4	3.3
Child Support	7	6.2
V.A	1	.8
Unknown (odd jobs, family, friends)	2	1.6
Outcome of Homelessness		
Referred to a shelter	31	26.0
Refused referral to shelter	4	3.3
Completed homeless grant application	39	33.0
Assisted with agency's donated dollars	17	14.4
Advised of potential assistance but did not return	22	18.6
Referred to a community resource (V.A., American Red Cross or Salvation Army)	1	.8
Family/Friends will help	4	3.3

Earned Income by Household Size (Monthly)

1 Person	2 Person	3 Person	4 Person	5 Person	6 Person
$140	$640	$480	$406	$1120	$1500
$200	$670	$496	$473		
$300	$920	$600	$612		
$318	$1040	$716	$720		
$320		$1280	$1250		
$352					
$400					
$610					
$650					